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CHALLENGE OF THE POOR TO THE SCHOOLS.

BY- OLSEN, JAMES

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EDUCATORS MUST UNDERSTAND THE CULTURAL CONFLICT BETWEEN THE LOWER CLASS CHILD AND THE ESSENTIALLY MIDDLE CLASS SCHOOL AND ADAPT CERTAIN SCHOOL PRACTICES TO CONSTRUCTIVELY ACCOMODATE THE WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS OF THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT STUDENT. FOR EXAMPLE, SINCE THE LOWER CLASS STUDENT DOES NOT VALUE THE COMPETITION AND SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT IMPLICIT IN ACADEMIC TESTS, SUCH TESTS SHOULD BE ABANDONED AS VALID MEASURES OF HIS ABILITY. INSTEAD, EDUCATORS MIGHT FOCUS ON THE STUDENT'S VOCATIONAL ORIENTATION AND ON HIS INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT PATTERNS. OTHER WAYS TO NARROW THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE SCHOOL AND THE LOWER CLASS STUDENT INCLUDE THE HOLDING OF INFORMAL PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS IN THE CHILD'S OWN HOME AND THE USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS AND METHODS APPROPRIATE TO THE STUDENT'S INTERESTS AND LEARNING STYLE. IN ADDITION, A TEACHER MIGHT EFFECTIVELY CAPITALIZE UPON THE SENSE OF COOPERATION WHICH CHARACTERIZES WORKING CLASS PEOPLE BY ENCOURAGING OLDER STUDENTS TO HELP THEIR YOUNGER SIBLINGS WITH THEIR SCHOOL WORK. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 47, NUMBER 2, OCTOBER 1965. (LB)

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Challenge of the POOR to the Schools

By JAMES OLSEN

THE deepening concern with educating the children of the poor grows out of fundamental problems in our society. The civil rights movement, youth unemployment, the continued migration of the poor to the great cities, and the need for trained manpower have forced educators to reexamine curriculum content and school practices. Many new programs have come out of this reexamination. The major goal of these programs is to reverse the educational handicaps that result from economic deprivation.

Martin Deutsch's preschool and kindergarten program, for example, attempts to make up for the negative effects of poverty on learning by giving three-, four-, and five-year-old children a rich preschool experience.¹ Provisions are made for block building, easel and finger painting, dramatic and outdoor play, collecting things, receiving and entertaining guests, cooking, etc. Activities which increase auditory and visual perception and discrimination, concept development, and the meaningful use of language are stressed. In this kind of program, children have an opportunity to develop the cognitive and sensory motor skills they need for successful participation in the later grades.

Mobilization for Youth's Homework Helper Program is another project designed to help students from lower-class homes overcome the academic handicaps that come out of poverty. In this program, high school sophomores and juniors from low-income families are hired for after-school employment as tutors of elementary school students who are retarded in reading or arithmetic. In this way, pupils are helped to acquire the academic skills they need to do their basic school work successfully; at the same time, the tutor who is doing well in high school is financially rewarded. Thus aspirations for school success are strengthened in this group.

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Many more programs could be cited as examples of the efforts educators are making to upgrade educational opportunities for the children of the poor. But all of them, however different they may be in their content or approach, have one central characteristic in common: They emphasize the environmental limitations of the slum and the bad effects of those limitations on learning. The fact is that we are building our educational programs almost exclusively around the weaknesses and deficits of low-income people.²

While it is unquestionably true that deprivation is one major aspect of lower-income culture, its significance, I believe, has been overemphasized. We have yet to face the fact that lower-class children are socialized in ways that are quite different from those of the middle class. We have yet to take full account of the differing value patterns, attitudes, and beliefs with which the lower-class child comes to school. The child brings the reality of his own life into the classroom, and to be effective the school must admit that reality. I suggest that the central challenge that the slum child presents to the school is not only the disadvantages that he brings with him. His challenge to us is much more profound than this. His ambitions, his hopes, his desires, his attitudes toward authority, education, success, and school, his fears, his habits, his hates—in short, his basic orientation toward life—are, in many ways, so different from ours that we do not understand him nor does he understand us.

In other words, the child born and raised in a lower-class cultural milieu derives his basic perceptions and values from that milieu. He comes to school with a culture—that is, with a way of perceiving and behaving—that is distinctly different from the school culture.³ The school is a middle-class institution, not only in its attitudes and value

¹ Martin Deutsch, *Descriptive Statement of the Institute for Developmental Studies*. New York: New York Medical College, 1960.

² Frank Riessman, *Action Approaches to Low Income Culture*. New York: Mobilization for Youth, September, 1962.

³ Frank Miller, "Implications of Urban Lower Class Culture for Social Work," *The Social Service Review*, September 30, 1959.

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orientations, but also in its controls and rewards, its teaching materials, its personnel, and in its administrative practices.⁴ The classroom then becomes the battleground of the culture conflict between the child and the teacher. Perhaps this is the major reason why the school experience of most lower-class children remains remote and substantially irrelevant to them and their concerns. We may subject the lower-class street-corner boy to school for ten years of his life, but psychologically he is still out there on the street corner with the boys where academic achievement, diplomas, and degrees are truly unimportant.

How is this child different from his peers in the middle class? First, his basic psychological responses of anger and sex are expressed very directly. Fighting, for example, is part of his life. He fights with his brothers and sisters. He fights with his enemies. He fights with his friends for fun. He fights with "outsiders" from other blocks and neighborhoods. He is physically disciplined by his parents. Since physical aggression is part of his everyday life, he is not intimidated very easily.⁵

Second, the lower-class child grows up very quickly. This is partly because he is on his own early in life and partly because he comes in direct contact with the fruits of unemployment, desertion, crime, and the like. While he may have a negative image of himself as a learner in school, on the streets he develops a sense of rugged independence that he needs for survival. (Unfortunately, because of his repeated failure in school and his alienation from much of the school curriculum, he does not exhibit the same independence in the classroom.) Since he is not supervised very closely by his parents, he has earlier experiences with sex. He also takes on the responsibility of the care of younger siblings quite soon and by the time he becomes fifteen or sixteen he is looked upon as a man.

This precocious maturity makes much of his school reading, for instance, unpalatable. The middle-class bias of our textbooks, which has been well documented elsewhere,⁶ makes them meaningless to this youngster. They are "phony" and the child quickly learns that this kind of material will not help him to understand life. The unreality of *Little Men*, *Little Women*, and *Anne of Green Gables* reminds him of little in his own experience.

Third, the lower-class child has a different idea

of social advancement—and this point is crucial for him in school. Since lower-class social organization is characterized by the extended family and reciprocity, there is a very strong emphasis on cooperation and mutual aid. If there is competition, it is physical in nature. But there is little competition in the sense the middle-class child knows it. Therefore, the lower-class child does not respond to the traditional test format.⁷

For the middle-class child, how one does on a test determines one's mark and that determines promotion and the likelihood of future academic success. When a teacher threatens a middle-class child with a failing grade, he is really threatening the basis of that student's personal worth. If the middle-class student suffers the humiliation of failure in school, his parents feel he has "let them down." Thus the middle-class person regards it as perfectly natural for people to strive to be bright, and the belief that one should spend sixteen years of his life in school before beginning adult work goes unquestioned. For the middle-class parent, the diploma and the degree become symbols of his children's successful performance of the initiation rites for entrance into adult life.

Penalties for Valuing Cooperation

Since lower-class children are relatively insouciant concerning the independent achievement that the test stresses, they are liable to be apathetic in the test situation. And since so great a part of our educational system is based upon I.Q. tests, standardized tests, school tests, quizzes, exams, College Boards, scholarship tests, talent tests, and the like, the lower-class child finds himself penalized for valuing cooperation and not competition.

Not only this, but the lower-class child has not been trained to value the behaviors implicit in the test situation. He does not especially value speed—a crucial element in test taking. On the contrary, there is some evidence which indicates that the culturally different student tends to become involved in a problem and stick with it.⁸ This can be disastrous in a test situation. As we have already pointed out, he does not value this kind of competition. Nor is he familiar with many of the different kinds of test items.⁹

The point here is that the test situation is not a congenial context for the culturally different. Here the student cannot readily project his drives for assertion and achievement and his repeated exposure to tests only reinforces his alienation

⁴ This assertion has been well documented by a number of writers. See especially August Hollingshead, *Elmtown Youth*. New York: John Wiley, 1949.

⁵ Allison Davis, "Society, School, and the Culturally Deprived Student," in *Improving English Skills of Culturally Deprived Youth*. Washington: U.S. Office of Education, 1964.

⁶ Abraham T. Tennenbaum, "Family Living in Textbook Town," *Progressive Education*, 31: 130-40. 1954.

⁷ Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child*. New York: Harper, 1962.

⁸ Riessman, *Action Approaches to Low Income Culture*, op. cit.

⁹ Allison Davis, "Socioeconomic Influences Upon Children's Learning." Speech delivered at the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, 1950.

from the middle-class culture of the school. This is not to say, as have so many in the past, that the lower-class student is a "slow learner." You cannot equate the culturally different with the slow learner. Lower-class children, like middle-class children, present a spectrum of abilities from the very low to the intellectually gifted. The research indicates, moreover, that our low economic groups include more pupils with high I.Q.'s than do middle-class groups.¹⁰ The reason is that most of our pupils come from the lower socioeconomic groups. In our large industrial cities, only 30 per cent of the school population comes from the white-collar and professional family.¹¹ As the middle-class exodus to the suburbs and the in-migration of the poor to the cities continue, we can expect to have schools that are almost entirely made up of the culturally different.¹²

Fourth, the culturally different do not have the same time orientation that we do. Our schools stress the future. We see elementary school as a preparation for high school. In high school we get ready for college. In college we get ready for either graduate school or a profession. If a youngster does not exhibit this concern for the future, teachers tend to regard him as lacking in ambition and intelligence.

Thus lower-class people do not value education in the same way that we do. This does not mean that they do not value education at all. Rather, the lower-class person has a kind of "bread and butter" approach to education. He does not especially value going to school for itself. Nor does he especially value intellectual activity *per se*. But he does want vocational improvement through education because he knows that such improvement will give him a better consumer life.¹³ Education helps get a better house, a larger automobile, nicer clothing. Thus while he does not share the middle-class emphasis on academic achievement, the lower-class person is interested in vocational goals. He is not so much concerned with "getting ahead" as he is in earning money so that he can have a good standard of living.

As we might expect, then, low-income groups, and Negroes in particular, have very positive attitudes toward education even though academic success is not their major source of status and prestige. (They value education but they also have very negative attitudes toward the school.)

¹⁰ Kenneth Eels, et al., *Intelligence and Cultural Differences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp. 120-61.

¹¹ Robert Havighurst, "Metropolitan Development and the Educational System," *School Review*, 69: 251-69, 1961.

¹² Robert Havighurst, "Metropolitan Development and Its Implications for American Education," in *A Seminar on Dimensions of American Society*. Washington: American Association for Teacher Education (in press).

¹³ *Ibid.*, Chap. 2.

In one research study, for example,¹⁴ when lower-class dropouts were asked what their biggest "gripe" about school was, they said that they resented the fact that they hadn't been prepared for a specific job. More than half of them wanted to return to school but said that they would want job training in school. Certainly, one of the major areas for curriculum reform is here. For many lower-class students attending our secondary schools, academic skills will have to be related to functional job situations. Otherwise we cannot expect to keep these students in school. As in Russia, pre-vocational courses closely integrated with work experience programs should be an accepted part of our high school curriculum.

Fifth, the attitudes of the culturally different and middle-class student toward authority figures are, in many important ways, dissimilar. The culturally different likes a strong leader who is male. (Working-class culture is essentially male-centered.) The working-class student comes from a home in which his father is the boss. His authority is backed up by physical force. When the middle-class teacher appeals to "goodness," "reason" and "social acceptability," his words fall on deaf ears, with the result that the teacher spends most of his time trying to keep order in the classroom so that he can conduct a lesson.

A Major Problem: Keeping Discipline

For the teacher in the slum school, this is probably the major difficulty: keeping discipline. Teachers who succeed learn to set up strict routines from which they do not deviate, establish clear limits from the first day, and make it clear to the students that they are there to learn. The working-class student needs a strong authority figure who can maintain discipline in the class in a climate of informality.

One study of a deprived-area school concluded that as much as 80 per cent of a teacher's school day is spent in trying to keep order.¹⁵ Even with the best teachers this figure never fell below 50 per cent. Thus the amount of instruction time in a slum school is severely limited, with the result that the students who need this time the most receive the least. Unlike middle-class children, the lower-class child rarely responds to moral exhortations which are intended to evoke feelings of guilt or shame. The expectation of the culturally different child is that the authority figure will set up fair

¹⁴ James A. Jones, "Attitudes Toward Education," a paper delivered for the School-Community Relations Course, Mobilization for Youth, New York, November 15, 1962.

¹⁵ Martin Deutch, *Minority Group and Class Status as Related to Social and Personality Factors in Scholastic Achievement*. New York: The Society for Applied Anthropology, 1960, Monograph No. 2, p. 23.

rules and enforce them without deviation. At the same time, the teacher lets the students know that he likes and respects them. He knows they can—and will—do the work, because this is why they are in school to begin with: to learn. Above all, the ground rules of classroom routines are not discussed; they are followed.¹⁶

Given these basic differences and other differences which have been explored elsewhere,¹⁷ we can see deep and striking conflicts between the working-class child and the middle-class school. In the best of faith, the middle-class person has a great deal of trouble understanding many of the value orientations of the poor because he unconsciously uses middle-class yardsticks to evaluate another culture. Most middle-class people, and teachers in particular, see lower-class life not as a separate "culture" with its own special viewpoints and values but as a chaotic and disorganized blob filled with deprivation and desperation.

With this point of view, we will not be able to make the changes we need in our schools. Our continued failure to change our curriculums constitutes a striking form of educational inequality. The fact is that our curriculums are organized in such a way as to favor children who are socialized one way rather than another.

An Intolerable Situation

One ludicrous and tragic instance of our inflexibility is well illustrated by those large numbers of pupils we have in our schools today who cannot, even in high school, read at a fourth-grade level, write a few simple, straightforward grammatical sentences, and make simple calculations involving multiplication and division. Yet those same students are "studying" geometrical theorems, Elizabethan drama, and irregular French verbs.¹⁸ Can we continue to tolerate this situation?

We cannot. As long as the curriculum is primarily the embodiment of middle-class values, only middle-class children will tend to do well with it. While education and community programs which attempt to uplift the poor are all to the good, we cannot realistically expect to change the unconscious values of the great mass of working-class youngsters. What we really want to do in programs like Higher Horizons is to change our students' lower-class ways of behaving so that they can aspire to and adopt an essentially middle-

class pattern of life. In short, we want them to become like us.

Even if this were desirable—and I am not at all sure that it is—how realistic a goal is this? Lower-class values have grown out of a firm matrix of economic and cultural patterns. These values are transmitted from the parents to the child. Unless we are prepared to change the way in which the family socializes the child—a power only dictatorships have—we cannot expect to convert most of the culturally different to a middle-class way of life.

It seems much more reasonable to reduce the social distance between the school and its students by finding out what the content of lower-class culture is and then modifying or changing some of what we teach and how we teach it.

I therefore make the following recommendations:

1. Since group intelligence tests reflect our middle-class criteria of achievement and success generally, we should not use the existing tests as a means of ability grouping. The latter practice tends to segregate lower-class children to an inferior scholastic status in the school and also lower teacher expectations of their academic potentialities. There should be less emphasis in our schools on *identifying* talent and greater emphasis on *developing* it.

Failure on tests does not generally inspire students with confidence anyway. The culturally different student does not respond well to test situations and repeated failure simply reinforces his negative self-image as a learner and his hostility toward the school. The research clearly indicates that non-promotion does not result in better work. Rather, there is abundant evidence to indicate that there is no consistent relationship between achievement, non-promotion, and ability.¹⁹

Flexible grouping plans like the ungraded primary school look promising, then, because they are more clearly based on the maturation and achievement patterns of the child and because the child who learns more slowly is not stigmatized as a "slow learner." Such grouping plans will also help us to individualize instruction for *all* children. Thus when a child is not doing the quality of work he is capable of, we can find out what's wrong and then give him the extra help he needs to do better.

2. The pre- and in-service training teacher programs have to be severely revamped so that middle-class teachers learn the content and style of

¹⁶ Miriam Goldberg, "Adopting Teacher Style to Pupil Differences," a paper delivered for Teachers College, Columbia, Conference on Disadvantaged Children, July, 1963, p. 9.

¹⁷ For a summary of twenty-five years of the research on psychological effects of social class differences in child rearing, see Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Socialization and Social Class Through Time and Space," in E. E. Maccoby, *et. al.*, *Readings in Social Psychology*. New York: Holt, 1958.

¹⁸ James B. Conant, *Slums and Suburbs, A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.

¹⁹ John I. Goodlad, "Research and Theory Regarding Promotion and Non-Promotion," *Elementary School Journal*, 53: 150-53, 1952.

lower-class life. Since 95 per cent of teachers in the United States are recruited from the middle-class,²⁰ we need to acquaint teachers with the social values and mores of lower-class children. In this way teachers can learn to exploit the positive strengths the culturally different have and to fight their weaknesses.

However, the weaknesses of the culturally different are well-known; their strengths are not. You do not change a person's behavior, attitudes, and values by telling him what's wrong with him. That only antagonizes him. If the culturally deprived were in charge of our school systems, they might try to "lower-classize" by telling us that our language lacks the color and vitality of their language; that our absurd emphasis on academic achievement and material affluence leads to divorce, alcoholism, and neurosis; that we neglect the present for the sake of the future, and then learn one day that we have not been really living at all; that we are more impressed by a person's title—Dr. So and So—that is, by the social position a person occupies rather than by the kind of person he is, etc., etc. Such statements about the middle class would not prepare the ground for our acculturation to a lower-class style of life. Nor do similar statements by us about them generate feelings of brotherly love.

Rather, let us act on the sensible assumption that the lower-class child is probably rather bright or at least of normal intelligence and that we have been trapped by the generic problems of our schools, that is, oversized classes, split shifts, teacher shortages, a dearth of specialized services, inadequate staffing, a shortage of classrooms, and a lack of money, as well as by our own ignorance about and indifference to lower-class culture. We can no longer afford to lose the talents and skills of 150,000 able youths a year from the lower-income levels. This amounts to three-quarters of all the talented lower-class students who do not go on to college.²¹

3. Reorganize our school practices so that they are more in line with working-class life. Working-class parents do not, as a rule, attend school functions like PTA meetings. This is not because they are not interested in their child's success in school. They are simply much more comfortable with a few people in an informal atmosphere.²² Formal presentations by school officials are less likely to bring parents into the school than short, informal, casual meetings. Every attempt should

be made to change the impersonal, bureaucratic organization of the school so that the social distance between the school and community is reduced.

There is ample evidence to indicate that most teachers working in slum schools feel alien to the community in which they work and leave the school as soon as they can transfer to a better one. For example, one study of the career patterns of Chicago public school teachers documents how teachers begin their teaching careers in slum schools and then move out.²³ Therefore, teachers must be brought into closer contact with the families of the children they teach. The teacher can hold his conferences with the parent in the parent's home. Three or four other parents can be invited to attend also. In this way, the parents and the teacher can talk informally about the student's school work over a cup of coffee. Then teachers can enlist the aid of parents in creating a more effective learning environment by seeing to it that students do their homework, study for tests, and so on. If the teacher visits the parent, the parent will be more likely to visit the teacher in school.

4. Instructional materials, and especially reading materials, must be changed. Reading selections from modern writers like Steinbeck and Hemingway are much more appropriate for the high school student than the currently used material. Book learning must be made functional, practical, and germane to the interests of the student.

Also nonverbal materials and audio-visual aids must be used extensively and frequently.²⁴ In this way, some of the roadblocks to greater verbalization on the part of the culturally different can be overcome.

5. Since our success in reaching the children of the poor depends upon our understanding more fully the *strengths* of working-class persons, let us build our educational programs on those strengths. We can use, for example, the cooperation that characterizes lower-income people by encouraging older siblings to help younger brothers or sisters with their school work. We can restructure our school schedules so that once students become involved in a lesson they can continue that involvement for a period of time. Also, we can relate the vocational interests of the culturally different student to the social studies and English curriculum by providing many applications of

²⁰ James T. Olsen, "The Verbal Ability of the Culturally Different," *Educational Forum*, in press.

²¹ Rexford G. Moon, Jr., quoted in *New York Times*, April 15, 1959.

²² Miller, *op. cit.*

²³ Howard Becker, "The Career of the Chicago Public School Teacher," *American Journal of Sociology*, 57: 423-26, 1952.

²⁴ James T. Olsen, "The Coming Revolution in Textbooks," *A.V. Communication Review*, Fall, 1964.

these skills in work contexts. We can exploit his precocious maturity by giving him realistic reading materials that relate to his life interests. In this way, he will be encouraged to talk about what really matters to him.

We are at the threshold of a revolution in our educational thinking in this country. The major part of this revolution lies in our realization that *all* children in the United States do not have the same opportunities to develop and exploit their

capacities and talents. Since cultural and economic differences among groups profoundly influence how a child sees himself as a person and as a learner, what he hopes to get out of school, what he wants to do—or not do—after he leaves school, the people he values as models to be emulated, and perhaps even how he learns, educators need to study class differences and then translate the insights they gain from that study into curricular and organizational modifications.

Language Difference or Language Difficulty?

A Bucket of Books

By JAMES H. DUGGINS, JR.

ONE of my students, a lanky Negro nicknamed Goose, has typical problems with phonics. When we were discussing the word "want," Goose asked, "Doan you mean 'won't'?" No, I had used the sentence, "I want my breakfast." That was indeed "won't," he insisted: "Ah won't mah brefuss." Phonics work with Goose must be highly specific. To assume that he will learn in the same ways as do his socially different peers who speak more nearly like the teachers do is to waste a good deal of his time.

Goose has other language differences, too. He does not use plurals. His family and peers reinforce this difference, since his "plural-less" patois is completely acceptable to them. They don't use plurals either. Not using them, Goose does not see them; if he sees a plural in print he will either block, become confused about the word, or disregard it entirely. Currently, his world is circumscribed in a lunch bag containing "two sandwich" and a school attended by "2,700 kid."

Significantly, this is but a language *difference* until he comes to school. Only in school or in the process of social mobility does this become a language *difficulty*. Because another group—those who write the books, create the tests, and train the employers—perpetuate a myth of correctness, the language of Goose and his peers becomes a

problem—and differences become difficulties and handicaps.

On our coast Chinese students for many reasons—docility, studious demeanor, etc.—are nearly universally loved by teachers. And yet the language patterns of Chinese students are almost identical with those of the American-born socially different. The Chinese student does not hear American English vowels in the same way—and he does not use plurals either. But how different is the handling of these students in English language classes! And perhaps this treatment is a reason for their different attitude toward school.

Just as with aliens, the patterns of verb tenses and subject-predicate agreement vary for the socially different. My best students substitute "was" for "were" when reading a printed line. The poorer readers block on "you were," because they do not in any other way use this alternate verb form. I was, you was, he and she was. My best readers substitute "was" in a line of print because then it makes sense. Poorer readers block because they do not know what it means—alone what it says.

The following anecdote perhaps shows this difference in oral usage. My classroom is a "spe. r. room" at the top of the building. Because I have the least able readers in our school, my class are 90 per cent male. My boys and I suffer the label "the dumb group," of course. One of my favorite and brightest students, Leo, had just

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